

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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A Shepherd's Story

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see what the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. – **Luke 2:1-20**

I am a shepherd. My family has a few sheep, my cousin's family has a few, an uncle has a few... you get the picture. Some of us have to watch them. My cousin and I are the unlucky ones. It is cold and uncomfortable in the fields at night. We put the sheep in rock corrals and then sleep across the opening so they can't get out, and hopefully, nothing else will try to get in. It is one of those jobs which is terribly boring for long periods of time, but there can be moments of terror and great danger, because if a jackal or, God forbid, a lion comes along, you have to know what to do. And of course, you get dirty and disheveled living out in the fields for days and weeks at a time, and the Pharisees look down on us for that. They forget that they can only dress in their nice warm wool cloaks and eat mutton and lamb chops because of us. If it were not for us, they would not live so high and mighty, but it has always been the way of the rich to sneer at the poor, even while they ride on our backs. And they forget that King David was a shepherd, and one of his songs speaks of the Lord as a shepherd. It is an honourable calling, even if some do not think so.

This night that you are thinking of, I remember it well. It was one of my first nights in the field. I was young, maybe fifteen. My cousin was there too, but he had been doing it for years. It was a cold night and windy, and it was hard to sleep. Long after midnight, half awake, I heard something strange, and terrifying. It was like the wind — I know this will sound foolish — but it was like the wind was singing, yes singing, like the choir in the temple I remember from when I went for my manhood ceremony. It was like voices and yet not like voices; there were no words, but I understood somehow. It was a happy song, no more than happy, it was joyful, yes that is the word — Joyful. I nudged my cousin, but he was tired and grumpy and told me I was dreaming. I tried to sleep, but the song was still there. And then suddenly, there were lights in the sky, like shooting

stars, only hundreds of them, and brighter than I had ever heard before, and different colours, and the singing and the lights moved together, somehow. I nudged my cousin again, but he didn't even look, just elbowed me hard and told me to leave him alone.

So I just sat there and enjoyed the lights and the singing wind, shared in the joy of it. It was wonderful. It filled me with hope, a sense that something was happening, something wonderful was about to happen.

And then, there was a strange sensation, like the wind was pulling at me, grasping at my clothes. And behind the singing, there was a voice, again a voice without words, but whose meaning I understood. A baby, it was telling me, go find the baby.

I left my cousin sleeping, and set out for Bethlehem. I avoided the rich sections of town; I knew the baby would not be found there. I don't quite know how I found him — I know this doesn't make sense — but it was like the wind led me. There is a story of the prophet Elijah, how he heard a still, small voice, like the sound of sheer silence. This must have been what it was like. It would have been so easy to ignore it, to turn my back and just go back to the field, but once I surrendered myself to it, it was compelling, and it led me right to the travelers' stopping place. The innkeeper was hanging around moaning about how the noise was keeping everybody up, and the baby was right where I knew he must be: lying in a manger, because there was no other place.

Any other time it would have made me frustrated and angry to see a baby born in such circumstances, the gift of new life treated so shabbily, but this night, the song of the wind had filled me with such joy, such hope, such peace, that there was no room in my heart for anger or bitterness. This child was good news for poor folk like me, I knew it. That was a long time ago, and my memory of many things has faded, but I still remember that night, and the sight of that child, and more than anything else, the feeling of joy and peace that came when I opened my heart to the song of the wind.